



## The Role of Communicative Adaptability in Lowering Intercultural Communication Apprehension of the Thai International College Students

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### Article info

#### Article history:

XXXX  
XXXXX  
XXXXXXX

#### Keywords:

Communicative Adaptability,  
Intercultural Communication  
Apprehension, Anxiety

### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to analyze the role of communicative adaptability (CA) in lowering intercultural communication apprehension (ICA) as well as exploring which aspects of CA that significantly contribute in lowering ICA among Thai international college students during interacting with a foreign instructor in a classroom. Participants in the study consist of 333 Thai college students who were studying at Assumption University, which is one of the leading private international universities in Thailand where all courses are taught in English. The data were collected at the end of the semester. Partial least squares regression is employed to analyze the relationship between all six aspects of CA (social experience, social composure, social confirmation, appropriate disclosure, articulation, and wit) and ICA. In addition, some characteristics of students including age, gender, student classification, grade point average, frequency of English Language used and frequency of enrollment are also included in the analysis.

Overall, the findings of the study indicate that there are two aspects of CA: social composure and articulation; that are significantly associated with lowering ICA. Hence, this study confirms that the Thai sample students who are well equipped with social composure and articulation tend to experience less anxiety and feel more comfortable to communicate in English with foreigners particularly with their foreign instructors.

### Introduction

Globalization and a high demand for English language usage has prompted many universities in Thailand to offer international programs in various disciplines. The internationalization of education is a growing phenomenon particularly in higher education. Having students from different cultural backgrounds is very valuable in higher education. Apart from the

economic benefit they bring, they also represent cultural diversity within the campus. Unfortunately, due to factors such as different cultural background and language barriers, both local and international students might experience anxiety while interacting in such diverse academic environment. It is evident that Thai students normally experience anxiety and apprehension when they have to interact with foreign instructors in classes taught in English (Bunrueng, 2008; Khamkhien, 2010).

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Regarding this, the students may face what is known as intercultural communication apprehension (ICA), which is “the fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated interaction with people of different groups, especially cultural and ethnic and/or racial groups” (Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997, p. 145). In addition, this phenomenon most likely happens in the situation that is filled with novelty, unfamiliarity, dissimilarity, and uncertainty (Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997). Previous studies reported that ICA could pose negative consequences in students success both academically and socially (McCrosky & Anderson, 1976; McCroskey & Richmond, 1988; McCroskey, Booth-Butterfield, & Payne, 1989; Neuliep & Ryan, 1998). Accordingly, this problem should be addressed. Fluency in English language could also lessen the feeling of anxiety during cross-cultural interaction. As stated in Kaekallaya (2006), anxiety can be overcome with language competency.

Besides proficiency in second language, an increase in communicative adaptability (CA) could also alleviate the feeling of ICA. Communicative adaptability as stated by Duran (1983, p. 320) is referred as “the ability to perceive socio-interpersonal relationship and adapt one’s interaction goals and behaviors accordingly”. It is proposed as characteristics of communication competence consisting of six aspects (social experience, social composure, social confirmation, appropriate disclosure, articulation, and wit). As noted by Duran (1983), social experience measures an individual’s desire and experience with communication in novel social contexts. Accordingly, it measures effect for and participation in varied social setting. Social composure measures how cool, calm, and collected an individual is in a social situation. It measures the degree to which one feels relaxed in social situation. Social confirmation measures the acknowledgment of the other’s life or projected self-image. It taps maintenance of the other’s projected social image by virtue of recognizing and confirming the projected social image of one’s partner. Appropriate disclosure measures one’s sensitivity to the cues of the other as an indication of how much to disclose. Accordingly, it assesses sensitivity to the intimacy level of social exchange. Articulation is the expression of ideas in a manner appropriate to the social context. It taps the appropriateness of one’s syntax and semantics. Lastly, Wit, it taps on the use of humor to diffuse social tension.

### **Communicative Adaptability (CA) and Intercultural Communication Apprehension (ICA)**

Regarding communication apprehension, all six dimensions of communicative adaptability are found to correlate with communication apprehension. However, specifically, social composure and social experience are found significantly to correlate with communication apprehension (Duran, 1983). Also, According to Kelly, Chase and Wiemann (1979), communication apprehension may be the reverse of communicative competence. Wieman (1977, p. 197) also discusses that “the competent communicator does not provoke anxiety in others by exhibiting anxiety in him/herself”. As a result, an individual with high socially composed manner is less likely to experience apprehension during social interaction.

Past studies find a negative relationship between communicative adaptability and ICA (Anarbaeva, 2006). Accordingly, an increase in communicative adaptability is related to a decrease in intercultural communication apprehension. Therefore, it could mean that as individuals master the ability to communicate with others in a social setting, they tend to experience less communication apprehension during interaction with individuals of another culture as well. Given the contribution of CA, this study investigates the role of communicative adaptability (CA) in lowering intercultural communication apprehension (ICA) among Thai college students during interaction with a foreign instructor in a classroom.

Considering all the supported arguments, inverse relationships of each dimension of communicative adaptability and intercultural communication apprehension are therefore postulated:

Hypothesis 1 : Social experience is negatively associated with ICA

Hypothesis 2 : Social composure is negatively associated with ICA

Hypothesis 3 : Social confirmation is negatively associated with ICA

Hypothesis 4 : Appropriate disclosure is negatively associated with ICA

Hypothesis 5 : Articulation is negatively associated with ICA

Hypothesis 6 : Wit is negatively associated with ICA

## Research objectives

1. To investigate the relationships between each aspect of Communicative Adaptability (CA) and Intercultural Communication Apprehension (ICA) among Thai international college students.

2. To explore which aspects of CA that significantly contributes in lowering ICA among Thai international college students.

## Conceptual Framework

### Communicative Adaptability (CA)

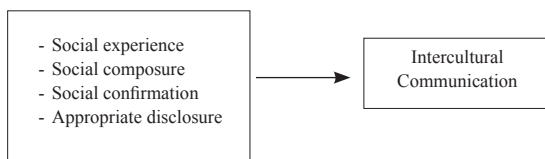


Figure 1 Research Conceptual Framework

## Research Methodology

### Sample Selection

The sampling frame consists of 333 Thai students who were studying at Assumption University. In addition, the data is collected mostly from third and fourth year students who enrolled in senior subjects. In particular, the selected subjects required the students to participate in a variety of activities such as role-play, case analysis, individual presentation and group presentation in order to properly assess their Communicative Adaptability (CA) and Intercultural Communication Apprehension (ICA). In addition, all of the selected classes are taught by foreign instructors from different countries including Australia, Ireland, U.S, China, Bangladesh, India and the Philippines. First year students are not included in this study due to the nature of subjects enrolled for freshmen which do not require many individual presentations.

### Measurement

The Communicative Adaptability Scale developed by Duran (1992) is used to measure communicative adaptability (CA). The questions were modified to suit with the situation for the purpose of this study. A series of 30 scale items measure social composure, social confirmation, social experience, appropriate disclosure, articulation, and wit. Self-report measures using a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (never true to me) to 5 (always true to me). This measurement of CA has been

employed in past studies to measure the ability to communicate in social settings. (Hecht, 1978; Zakahi & Duran, 1984).

The measurement of intercultural communication apprehension (ICA) is modified from the scale developed by Neulip and McCroskey (1997). The Personal Report of Intercultural Communication Apprehension (PRICA) consists of 14 statements measuring communication apprehension in intercultural contexts. The PRICA, adapted from a five-step Likert-type scale, asks respondents to answer 14 statements to indicate their agreement from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). This measurement has been used in previous studies to measure the anxiety of an individual while interacting in culturally diverse environment (Jung & McCroskey, 2004; Anarbaeva, 2006).

In addition, control variables including some characteristics of the students that could affect ICA are included. These control variables include age, gender, student classification, cumulative GPA, frequency of English Language used and frequency of enrollment.

### Data Collection and Procedure

The data were collected from the students using self-administered questionnaire. In addition, the data were collected right after the students presented their oral presentation at the end of the semester.

Regarding the oral presentation, the students were required to present their final term project individually on the final week of the semester. During or after the presentation, the students were asked by foreign instructors to clarify some points relating with the topics of their presentation. In addition, the students were expected to present professionally by not looking at a note and maintain eye contact with the instructor. Right after the presentation, the students were given approximately 15 minutes to complete the survey and return them back to the researcher.

### Statistical Method

Partial Least Squares (PLS) regression was used to analyze the proposed model in this study. PLS was chosen for this study due to its advantages includes theoretical conditions, measurement conditions, distribution considerations, and practical considerations (Falk & Miller, 1992). PLS is a statistical method that combines feature from principle component analysis and multiple regression analysis, which matches the research objective as it facilitates the analysis and investigation of large and complex path models. Essentially, it relies on the data that does not require normal data distribution (Chin &

Newsted, 1999). Accordingly, PLS is appropriate in this research because the test of normality indicated that most variables except social confirmation, articulation, and wit are not normally distributed. PLS analysis was performed using WarpPLS 5.0 developed by Kock (2015).

#### Data Analysis

The sample's age is mostly 21 (standard deviation = 1.17) with the average GPA of 2.72 (standard deviation = 0.46). The majority is female accounting for 67 percent. For the student classification, most of them are in their third year (55 percent) followed by fourth year (36 percent) and second year (9 percent). For the frequency of enrollment, there were 296 students (89 percent) enrolling for the first time which accounts for the majority of them; 34 students (10 percent) for the second time and only 3 students (1 percent) for the third time. Regarding frequency of English language used, most of them (168) communicate in English often (51 percent); 110 students (33 percent) occasionally communicate in English; 31 students (9 percent) report of having chances to communicate in English very often. There are 24 students (7 percent) that hardly have a chance to speak English. None of them indicated no chance of communication in English.

#### Model Assessment

Regarding model assessment, The test of validity and reliability were first conducted to determine properties of the instrument before estimating the structural model. The result indicated all the measurement instruments passed for the criteria for both convergent and discriminant validity with the loadings that equal or greater than 0.50.

Second, reliability analysis was conducted to measure the consistency of the measurement instrument (Nunnally, 1978). Both Cronbach's alpha coefficient and composite reliability were conducted. The result indicated that all latent variables met with both Cronbach's alpha coefficient and composite reliability requirement with the value of each latent variable above 0.70. Accordingly, the results of this reliability test ensure the decent reliability level of the measurement instrument in this study.

Regarding the test for the existence of multicollinearity, full collinearity Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) was conducted in order to measure the degree of collinearity among variables, including both indicators and latent variables. Full collinearity VIFs of 3.3 or lower is adequate for latent variables in PLS-based structural equation model (Kock & Lynn, 2012). The results suggest

the existence of no multicollinearity as all of latent variables have the full VIF values lower than 3.3.

#### Results

The results of all six hypotheses of H1-H6 regarding the association between each aspect of Communicative Adaptability (CA) and Intercultural Communication Apprehension (ICA) are reported in Table 1. P-value is used to determine the significance of the results (Kline, 2004). The summary of Path coefficients and R-squared are also reported. In addition, R-squared is used to determine the proportion of variance explained by the model. It is a measure of how much of the variability in the outcome is accounted for by the predictors (Field, 2013)

Table 1 reports the results of H1-H6 as represented from column one to column six in the table. H1 predicts a negative relationship between social experience and intercultural communication apprehension (ICA). Although the result suggests a negative relationship between these two variables, it is not statistically significant at 5 percent ( $\beta = -0.081$ ;  $p = 0.097$ ). H2 predicts a negative relationship between social composure and intercultural communication apprehension (ICA). The result shows a negative and strong relationship between these two variables at the significant level below 0.1 percent ( $\beta = -0.28$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). H3 predicts a negative relationship between social confirmation and intercultural communication apprehension (ICA). The result reveals a negative relationship; however, it is not statistically significant at 5 percent ( $\beta = -0.061$ ;  $p = 0.126$ ). H4 predicts a negative relationship between appropriate disclosure and intercultural communication apprehension (ICA). The result reveals that there is a negative relationship between these two variables. Nevertheless, it is not statistically significant at 5 percent ( $\beta = -0.077$ ;  $p = 0.125$ ). H5 predicts a negative relationship between articulation and intercultural communication apprehension (ICA). The result shows a negative and strong relationship between these two variables at significant level below 0.1 percent ( $\beta = -0.18$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). H6 predicts a negative relationship between wit and intercultural communication apprehension (ICA). Remarkably, the finding is in contrast with the prediction. It reveals a positive relationship between these two variables ( $\beta = 0.026$ ;  $p = 0.35$ ). Therefore, hypothesis 2 and 5 are supported as shown in the summary of hypothesis test in Table 2.

Lastly, some characteristics of students that might explain ICA are also incorporated as control variables in the analysis. The results reveal that both frequency of



English language used and frequency of enrollment have strong relationship with ICA.

**Table 1** PLS Results

Independent Variables (CA)	Dependent Variable					
	Intercultural communication apprehension (ICA)					
	(1) H <sub>1</sub>	(2) H <sub>2</sub>	(3) H <sub>3</sub>	(4) H <sub>4</sub>	(5) H <sub>5</sub>	(6) H <sub>6</sub>
Social experience	-.081					
Social composure		-.28***				
Social confirmation			-.061			
Appropriate disclosure				-.077		
Articulation					-.18***	
Wit						.026
Age	.018	.043	.019	.014	.031	.022
Male dummy variable	-.042	-.01	-.048	-.046	-.031	-.052
Student classification	.067	.037	.066	.07	.056	.065
Cumulative GPA	-.016	.029	.008	-.009	.032	-.007
Frequency of English language used	-.174**	-.074	-.183***	-.177***	-.141	-.197***
Frequency of enrollment	.144**	.144**	.144*	.145**	.151**	.143*
R-square	.08	.134	.078	.08	.102	.075

\*p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001; Standardized coefficients are reported

**Table 2** Summary of Results

Hypotheses	Supported
H1: Social experience is negatively associated with ICA	No
H2: Social composure is negatively associated with ICA	Yes
H3: Social confirmation is negatively associated with ICA	No
H4: Appropriate disclosure is negatively associated with ICA	No
H5: Articulation is negatively associated with ICA	Yes
H6: Wit is negatively associated with ICA	No

## Discussion

For the association of each aspect of Communicative Adaptability (CA) toward Intercultural Communication Apprehension (ICA), only social composure and articulation are found to negatively and significantly be associated with ICA. The result indicates that the Thai student who is calm, relax and appropriately express the idea clearly in social interaction using English tends to experience less anxiety while communicating with a foreign instructor. Actually, the finding is congruent with Duran (1983) as he stated that social composure is found to be significantly correlated with communication apprehension. However, Duran also mentions that all six dimensions of communicative adaptability are found to correlate with communication apprehension particularly with social composure and social experience.

Although the result of this study found only two dimensions being significantly and negatively correlated, there is a possible explanation. Since ICA was measured in the situation where the students individually interact with foreign instructors during the presentation, other aspect of CA might be irrelevant for this context. In addition, there were rules and guideline regarding the dialog, gestures and timing that the students have to follow during the presentation. Hence, other aspects of CA such as social experience, appropriate disclosure, social confirmation and wit might not substantially contribute in lowering the level of ICA in this situation since most of the students have to present according to the guidelines.

All in all, this study indicates that the Thai sample students who are well equipped with high level of social composure and articulation tend to feel more relaxed and clearly express ideas while communicating with others in English which in turn lessen the feeling of anxiety during communicating with their foreign instructors in the classroom setting.

Considering the benefits of CA as reported in the study, educators and international education institutes may utilize the findings in order to develop CA development program to prevent and lessen ICA among Thai international college students. Integrating CA development program particularly in the area of social composure and articulation is considered necessary in order to facilitate the students to experience less anxiety and feel more comfortable to communicate in English with foreigners particularly with their foreign instructors.

This research also provides practical contributions. Given the impact of ICA that inhibit the chance of students who are non-native English speakers to learn and develop English communication competency (Bunrueng, 2008; Khamkhien, 2010), understanding some personal competency and communication skills of the students that can lower this problem can suggest some intervention to help the students overcome this English learning barrier (Tsiprakides & Keramida, 2009).

Lastly, there is a possibility for future research to replicate the study in other context to explore the generalizability of the finding. Other contexts such as Thai students from different education level apart from university level could also be studied. Moreover, exploring the contribution of CA on ICA in other context apart from academic setting situation such as during job interview or pitch presentation would also be useful.

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